

Me, an Evangelist? Sermon Series
Sermon #1: Do I Have What It Takes?
Matt. 5:13-16
Jan. 8, 2006
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These next four sermons may sound a bit familiar to some of you. If you were here about this time three years ago, you may remember that I preached a series about evangelism. I figure it never hurts to hear it again. If my daughter can't remember when I preached to her about cleaning her room last week, how can I expect you to remember what I said three years ago about evangelism?

Many of the ideas for these sermons came from a book called, "Becoming a Contagious Christian," by Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of Willow Creek, that little church in Barrington. I thought that would be a good book to use, since they seem to know a thing or two about bringing people into the church. I also will be referring to a book about evangelism by William McKay, who works with the Stephen Ministry program. He has some interesting things to say about what evangelism is and isn't.

In his book, McKay lays out eight reasons why Christians are afraid of evangelism. One of the reasons he gives is that people are afraid of evangelism because they don't know how to do it. That's what we found here at CCC during our Long Range Planning process a few years ago. During one of the retreats, we asked people to complete a survey rating different aspects of the church.. The statement that scored the fifth highest in approval was this: "I'm willing to invite others to church." But the very lowest one, the one people rated the absolute lowest, was this: "This church provides training in sharing our faith story with others." We can't do evangelism if we don't know how, so that's why it's important that we talk about it. What I hope to do in the next few weeks is to reclaim evangelism as an important part of the church, to redefine it and take some of the mystery out of it, and to give some practical "how-to" advice on doing evangelism.

Another reason McKay says that people don't practice evangelism is that they are afraid of the "E-word." Before we talk about what it takes to be an evangelist, it might be helpful to know what it is we're talking about. The word "evangelism" comes from the Greek word "evangelia", which means "good news." The Greeks used the word to mean giving the folks back home the good news that their troops had won a battle. So an evangelist is simply someone who shares good news. One of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, defines an evangelist as "a preacher of good news, a bearer of glad tidings, a practitioner of gospel medicine." If evangelism is sharing the good news about Jesus, then an evangelist is one who does the sharing.

That's the dictionary definition. But the cultural definition is much less benign. It has been desecrated by the exploits of TV evangelists or pushy, forceful people who knock on your door and interrupt your dinner to force-feed you the gospel. I don't doubt their intentions, but I do question their methodology. These kinds of experiences have turned us off from talking about evangelism and its place in the church.

That's truly a tragedy, because being an evangelist should not carry such baggage. Being someone who shares the good news should be good news! But because of the stigma now attached to it, that title and the whole concept of evangelism has been turned

into one of those words you have to whisper in mixed company. “So, what was today’s sermon about?” (*Whisper*): “Evangelism!” “Oh, really? Wow!”

I don’t like guerilla evangelists, but I’m a firm believer that offensive and arrogant evangelism tactics are no excuse to give up all together. It’s time to take back that word, to reclaim it for what it is supposed to be, and to put it to use in the church. And the best place to start our redefinition is with God’s word about evangelism. In Today’s passage from Matthew, Jesus uses an interesting metaphor to describe you and me. He calls us the salt of the earth. I really like how the Bible translation The Message puts it: “You are here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.”

As Christians, we are called to give the world its flavor, which is interesting, because down through the years Christianity has gotten a bad rap as being bland and boring. Is this right? Are you bland and boring? Am I bland and boring? I don’t experience this church or any of you as bland and boring; this is exciting, God is doing great things through us. I don’t know that salt is the best modern metaphor for us. Maybe today Jesus would say, “You are the smoking hot Jalepeno pepper of the earth!” “You are the gooey, scrumptious chocolate chip cookie of the earth!” We bring out the God-flavors.

Jesus also calls us the light of the world. This is the highest praise, because in John’s gospel Jesus calls himself the same thing: “I am the light of the world.” By transferring that title to us, he is equipping us to do his work. But our light is not self-lit; we have been lit by the light that has come into the world, so that we may shine for all to see. We are windows through which people see God’s love and God’s work. People may not be able to see God, but they can see us, and God’s love shining through us. We’re like lighthouses; we are the beacon that helps people find their way to God. And if we hide that light, people may not find their way.

This brings me to another of McKay’s reasons why people don’t share the good news: fear of rejection. No one likes rejection. No one likes the thought of being turned down. Which is why evangelism should be easy. It has a 100% success rate. I guarantee you that if you take the chance to invite someone to church, then you have succeeded. Now, whether they come or not is up to them, right? It’s not up to you to make them come to church. Evangelism is about the process, not the results. It’s not up to you. We plant the seeds but only God can make them grow. It is not our job to convert people; it is not our job to give them faith. Which brings me to the job description of an evangelist. You’ll be glad to know that it’s not too lengthy; in fact, there’s only one bullet point, one requirement to be an evangelist. And that requirement is to be yourself. If you choose not to fulfill this requirement and insist on being someone else, then I can’t in good conscience endorse your work as an evangelist for God’s church. But if you’re willing to be yourself then you have what it takes to be an evangelist.

Bill Hybels says that people today who are searching for a church don’t want anything phony, fake, or fabricated. They want real: real people, real stories, real warmth. They want to know that you are human and make mistakes, they want to know that you can empathize with their search, they want to know that you also have questions and doubts sometimes. Frederick Buechner said that doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep us awake and moving. And people want a church that is awake and moving in God’s name, searching and learning and growing together in Christ.

If we are willing to risk being real with people, if we are willing to open up our lives to their questions, their longings, their hope, then we are capable of sharing the good news of Christ with them. People react much more positively when you reveal yourself just as you are – good points, weaknesses, struggles, and all. When others see that you have the same kind of problems they do, yet you find strength and hope in Jesus, this allows them to believe that God might help them, too.

I'll talk more next week about the people to whom we might say those words, but I want to close today with a story. I want to tell you the story of Albert McMacon. Now, my guess is that none of you know who Albert McMacon is, and yet he is one of the most influential people in Christianity in the 20th century. Because of Albert, literally millions of people have heard the good news of Christ all across the world.

In 1934, in Charlotte, NC, there was a 17-year-old boy who'd been invited to a local religious revival by a friend of his. Although his friend was gently persistent, this boy resisted invitation after invitation, until finally he agreed to go only if he could drive his friend's truck.

So the friend reluctantly handed over the keys, and this boy drove the truck to the next meeting. He stayed in the back of the revival tent, listening to what the preacher was saying. And he was spellbound. He went back the next night. And the next night. On the last night, that 17-year-old boy, who only came because of an invitation and some truck keys, decided to give his life to serving Christ.

That 17-year-old boy was Billy Graham. Ever heard of him? But who's heard of Albert McMacon? Albert was the friend who owned the truck, the one who invited Billy Graham, to hear God's word for the first time. If it hadn't been for Albert's courage, patience, and generosity with the car keys, Billy Graham may have never become a Christian.

We can't all be Billy Graham. But we can all be Albert McMacon. Isn't it true that most of us arrived at our faith because someone told someone who told someone who told us? That's the way it's been working for 2000 years, and we are now bearers of the light who pass it on to others. That's evangelism. And we all have what it takes to be evangelists.